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To the Editor:

Your Feb. 25 editorial "Sideshow at Geneva" pictured a treaty to control biological weaponry (B.W.) as a merely cosmetic adornment. The Soviet Union has now acted to resolve the deadlock at the Geneva talks by a treaty proposal consistent with the one sponsored by Britain and the United States. The public perception of the importance of B.W. may now have a practical bearing on the pace of further progress toward firm international agreement.

One can argue, it is true, that these are "weapons nobody expects to use anyway," because "such agents pose as much of a threat to the potential user as to the potential enemy." It is also true that President Nixon's unilateral renunciation of U.S. efforts in biological warfare was an important step toward the control of these perils.

But this is only half the story. Until now the unilateral moratorium by the U.S. had elicited no similar initiative from the Soviet bloc, no commitments, no information concerning any efforts they may be continuing in this field, without the benefit of the public ventilation that has moved U.S. policies.

Instead, they had proposed a bland, really meaningless avowal to ban the production of "all chemical and biological weapons." In this form, the proposal cannot even be defined, much less verified, since many potential chemical warfare agents are common articles of commerce—for example, chlorine gas, widely used to sanitize city water supplies, was used in the first major chemical attack by the Germans in World War I.

Such vague proposals were hardly to be regarded as a serious basis for regulating national behavior. The way is now open to more serious discussion of the many technical problems involved in a credible agreement to control chemicals.

The achievability of biological disarmament should not be confused by

any complacency about the future potential of uncontrolled B.W. Certain infectious agents could be used in ways that probably would safeguard the attacker and any renewed research would surely focus on the solution to this problem. Even today, plant diseases can be directed against specific crops. More important, the one time to stop a technology race is before the utilities of a new weapon have been developed and demonstrated.

We have a timely opportunity to negotiate a comprehensive ban on biological weapons and to forestall their proliferation only because they have not yet been developed and demonstrated on a strategically significant scale in modern times. If the Geneva conference can reach accords that will help prevent a virological Hiroshima, this would indeed be a substantive and meaningful accomplishment.

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